

Choosing Your Snare Drum

All snares are not created equal.

BOB SAYDLOWSKI

THIS COLUMN begins a series on how to buy drum equipment. When selecting a piece of equipment, there are many variables to consider, such as size, application, shell type, desired sound, and versatility. Drum hardware has its own set of options, as in compactness, stability, and application. Let's begin with the focal point of your drumkit, the snare drum.

Size Matters

Snare drums range in size from 3 x 13 piccolo snares to 8 x 14 deep rock drums. (Some players even go beyond this and play a 10 x 14 marching snare!) The most common sizes are 5 1/2 x 14 and 6 1/2 x 14. Fundamentally, the deeper the shell, the deeper the tone, since more air is being moved inside the drum. The music you play will more or less dictate the snare drum size you want. Rock players will gravitate towards the deeper sizes, while other drummers will prefer a standard 5-inch or 5 1/2-inch drum. One major point to consider if you buy a deep snare is to be sure your snare stand goes low enough to comfortably place the drum in front of you. Piccolo snares are capable of higher tunings, and do cut through quite well because of their shallow depth. A piccolo would be nice as an "auxiliary" snare, and in certain situations can work well as the main snare drum.

The Old Shell Game

Practically all the major drum companies offer both steel shell and wooden shell (primarily maple) snare drums. However, there are other shell materials being used — brass, fiberglass, aluminum, phenolic composites, and exotic woods — which will give slightly different timbres. To go into the sound characteristics of each is beyond the scope of this article, so for now I suggest you listen to as many different shells as possible to find the sound you're after. Metal drums can serve a dual purpose, doubling for a timbale-like sound when the snares are turned off, due to their clanky overring (which requires some degree of muffling when the snares are on).

There's been an ongoing argument regarding wood shell drums, namely, whether the number of wood plies affects the drum's sound. While one manufacturer may tout a 15-ply shell, the individual plies may be thinner than the ones in another company's 6-

ply shell, making the total thickness almost the same. The general rule is that a thin shell vibrates more than a thick shell. (Which is why violins are not made of plywood!) But the attachment of lugs, screws, and other hardware restrict shell vibrations, so a quality drum will sound good no matter how many plies it has.

Hardware Wars

The drum hoops play a part in the overall sound, too. Many snare drums have pressed metal hoops, while others feature die-cast hoops. It's a matter of preference,

I prefer to leave these to the symphonic percussionists; wire snares seem to be the norm for dance drumming.

The number of tension lugs and ventholes also figure into the overall drum sound. The more ventholes, the quicker air is dispersed from the drum, making it more responsive to sensitive playing. (Most have only one or two vents, but I know of one custom snare maker who is venting at each lug point.) Also, the more tension points there are, the more exact your tuning can be. Normally, snare drums have eight to ten tuning rods per side. Anything

Your snare is the lead voice of the choir.

although the cast hoops are stronger, won't warp, and give a more solid rim shot sound.

Three main types of strainers are available: parallel, center-throw, and side-throw. While the parallel strainer allows more snare contact with the bottom head, even tension of the snares, and offers more sensitivity, I feel that there are usually too many adjustment points, which can sometimes be a hassle. The two other strainer types use levers to drop the snares, usually held by cording or plastic strips. These have only one fine-tension knob (on the throw-off side), but both work efficiently. It's simply a matter of one design over the other. When testing the drum, beware that the throw-off doesn't inadvertently drop the snares while you're playing. If it does, cross that drum off your prospect list. In certain situations, the noise of the snares releasing and re-tensioning may be undesirable, so keep in mind that some strainers are more silent than others.

Most snare drums are fitted with wire snares in 20 to 24 strand units. Certain esoteric models may use cable or gut for a more "brittle" sound.

less than that, and the drum will have decreased response and sensitivity.

Looking Good

Cosmetics seem to play an important role nowadays. Snare drums are available in colored plastic coverings, wood grain veneers, mirror chrome plating, gold brass, engraved metal, etc. A plastic covering will restrict the shell vibrations somewhat, but requires less protection and maintenance. A plated finish looks marvelous when new, but it's prone to greasy fingerprints and in time, pitting and flaking. Most wood finishes are hard-lacquered to protect the finish, but it never hurts to add another coat of polyurethane.

A "fashionable" drum will most likely cost more, and its sound may be no different than a "plain" drum. The question is whether the drum's appearance is of enough importance to your band's look, your wallet, and your ego.

Defects, Dollars

Used snare drums require some inspection before purchase. Obvious at-a-glance defects would include cracked

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emulating horns.

The exception is the trombone. In this instance, you may want to reset your wheel range to a higher-than-usual interval, so that slides of at least a fourth are possible. These slides are in both directions, of course. Trombone players tend to scoop into notes frequently.

If you are emulating a lead guitar, you will never want to bend down — a guitar can't do that. (Okay, whammy bars excepted.) You also should not bend much more than a minor third up; larger bends lead to broken strings.

Downward bends are useful for imitating a bass guitar. While note bending is infrequent on this instrument, slides are pretty common, and they are usually downward. I've found that even with my pitch bend range set to a whole step, I can do an effective slide an octave downward just by hitting the top note and bending down immediately, then hitting the bottom note just after the full bend range is reached. It's a bit tricky, because the wheel has to be re-centered between the two notes, and you want this to sound as connected as possible. With a bit of practice, this is a very effective technique.

Got No Wheels?

Some readers will own keyboards that do not have the standard pitch and mod wheels, but don't worry — the practice drills work just as well on joysticks and other controllers. Some keyboards do not allow the bend range to be altered, and you are forced to live with the preset interval. Joystick controllers and lever controllers (such as on some Roland keyboards) allow the modulation to be controlled with the same stick as the pitch bends. This can be handy, except for the fact that some keyboards only use this to switch modulation full on or off, instead of controlling it continuously.

In any case, these pointers will get you moving along

the road to pitch bend perfection. Practice doing solo licks incorporating bends, and spend time listening to the instruments that you will be emulating. Do the things that they do, and don't do what they can't do. Soon you'll be popping wheelies all over the road.

Sam Mims plays multi-keyboards for the Newks.

DRUMS...

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or bent hoops, a rusted or mangled strainer, missing lugs or rods, etc. Less obvious, but crucial to the drum's performance, would be an out-of-round wood shell, separations in the wood plys, or an uneven bearing edge, any of which would make tuning and head seating difficult. The drum's sound would certainly suffer.

Last but not least is your budget allotted for a snare drum. There are at least 30 companies making snare drums; many of them offer various models. You should set a definite price range, research all available models in that range, and then narrow them down to the specific size, shell type, etc. you're looking for. And then, of course, play them! Just don't look at one particular brand name; you may be pleasantly surprised by others.

Don't scrimp too much when buying your snare drum — it's the "lead voice of the choir." I've collected about 12 different drums, each one having definite qualities to suit a certain type of musical situation, even using two with my drumkit at times.

Everyone has his own idea of what makes a good snare, and the drum you choose should be able to express your own individual musicality.

Next time: Bass drums and toms.

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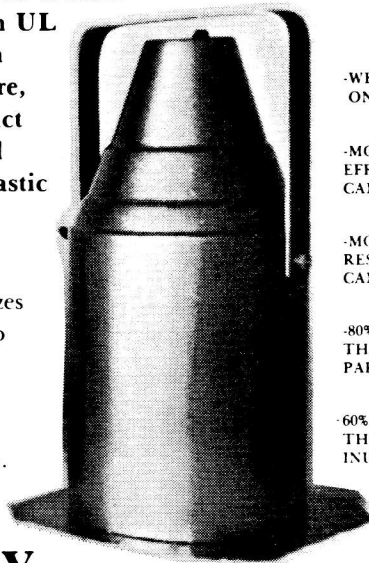
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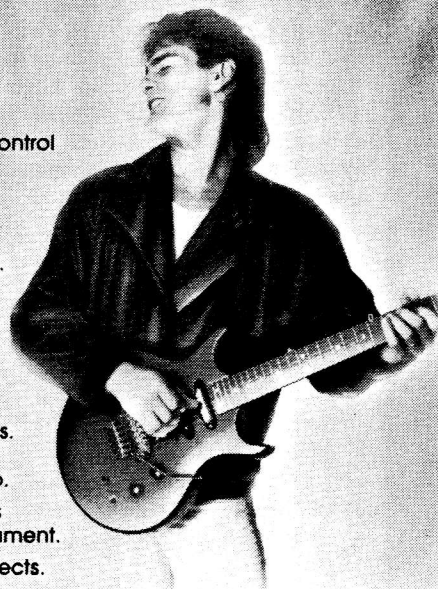
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